

Irish Sailing Performance Squad Incident 21st October Report – Summary and Recommendations

Background

In October 2017 the Irish Sailing Performance Optimist Squad were training in Dun Laoghaire Harbour. Early into this coaching session, winds significantly changed direction and gusts increased in strength, as the south-western edge of Storm Brian's eye-wall approached, resulting in a number of boats being abandoned and damaged. While no sailors were harmed, the incident raised fundamental questions around the policies, processes and procedures of Irish Sailing's performance coaching programmes that are now undergoing considered and urgent review.

Irish Sailing immediately appointed independent external advisors acting on a voluntary basis, to investigate and report on the incident. The investigators spent over 1,000 hours interviewing various stakeholders and examining data to compile a report. It is important to note that the purpose of the investigation was to identify gaps and issues with a view to improving our processes, rather than to apportion blame.

In this executive summary we set out some contextual background; the synopsis, summary analysis, and the recommendations from the report; along with a number of changes which were implemented by Irish Sailing immediately post incident, and actions following submission of the final report to the Irish Sailing Board of Directors.

Context

The Irish Sailing Performance Optimist Squad was stood down post-Rio due to funding shortfalls in the aftermath of the Olympic games. The re-establishment of the Performance Optimist Squad in 2017 to regain the first rung of the pathway was seen as a positive step to help build on the Irish Sailing success in the Rio games.

This incident has highlighted the shortfalls in Irish Sailing procedures for organising its performance coaching activities, also the need for more clarity and guidance both for Irish Sailing squads, and also for Irish Sailing affiliated organisations, who are engaged in water-based coaching activities, that are not formal Irish Sailing accredited training programmes.

Irish Sailing Immediate Actions

Irish Sailing immediately established an independent, external and voluntary investigation team with terms of reference to:

- ascertain the sequence of events from the decision to launch, to the safe return of the personnel and equipment ashore.
- identify any failings in policies, protocols, procedures and process during the period
- recommend to the board of Irish Sailing any actions required to help mitigate the risk of such an incident from reoccurring in the future

The Investigation team were given full cooperation from all concerned and were provided with full access to all personnel, documentation and policies of Irish Sailing. Irish Sailing had committed to publish the findings of the investigation but have now decided to publish the report in full. The original aim was to have a completed report submitted for mid-November, however the

investigation team requested, and were given, additional time to complete the investigation. The final report was submitted in late January, and considered by the Board of Irish Sailing at their meeting on 6th February.

EXTRACTS FROM THE REPORT

1. Synopsis from the Report

In June 2017, Irish Sailing decided to re-include the Optimist dinghy class within its Performance Pathway programme. The Optimist dinghy is internationally recognised as a “starter” sailing craft, typically used by young sailors aged approximately eight to sixteen years old. The Irish Sailing’s 2017 – 2018 Optimist Squad was re- established in September 2017 and a Pathway Development Coaching Programme was put in place for sixteen of Ireland’s most promising junior sailors.

In September 2017, Irish Sailing recruited an experienced international Optimist coach from Belgium to act as the Lead Coach. He had not previously worked with Irish Sailing, but came highly recommended from his earlier coaching of the privately organised “DOGS” Optimist summer coaching programme in Dun Laoghaire.

A Dublin-based Assistant Coach was also recruited to assist the Lead Coach for the Squad’s inaugural coaching session. She is a qualified Irish Sailing / Coaching Ireland (Sport Ireland) sailing coach and a former member of a previous junior Irish Sailing Pathway Development Squad.

Neither of the coaches had previously worked professionally with Irish Sailing, nor with one another. Apart from brief electronic communications exchanges, they only met in person on the morning of the inaugural coaching event.

On the 21st of October 2017, the Squad members and their coaches launched in Dun Laoghaire Harbour, at approximately 11:00. Early into this coaching session, winds significantly changed direction and gusts increased in strength, as the south-western edge of Storm Brian’s eye-wall approached. This brought sudden strong squalls, with failing visibility and quickly developed short period peaky wave patterns, within the Harbour. Some of the sailors began to experience difficulties, as conditions worsened, it was decided to abandon the coaching session and this decision was then communicated to the sailors.

Nine of the squad members, who were in a more sheltered windward position, managed to return to shore safely, under their own sail power. The remainder of the fleet, in a more open leeward position, got caught in unusually- high and confused wave patterns, which developed near the East Pier wall. These seven members were forced to abandon their dinghies, which eventually sustained significant damaged from impact against the pier wall. The investigation team understands that none of the squad members or coaching staff sustained any serious injury, or chronic trauma, as a result of this incident. It is further understood that Irish Sailing assisted in securing speedy recompense for the damage to the boats which sustained damage.

During the coaching session, the sailors were accompanied by their two coaches, each separately and single-handedly operating a Rigid Inflatable Boat (RIB). Early into the coaching session both coaches encountered difficulties with these boats, which were unfamiliar to them. By the time the incident escalated to emergency proportions, the Lead Coach’s RIB had become completely disabled, with a fuel related engine failure. It was slowly drifting, under anchor, toward the East Pier Wall.

From this point onwards, the Lead Coach was helpless to assist and, without radio capability available to him, he was unable to manage the overall situation.

The Assistant Coach, who had previously been escorting the nine most windward sailors back to the shore, noticed the seven more leeward sailors, further out in the Harbour, in difficulties against the East Pier wall. Observing that the Lead Coach still seemed to be experiencing engine difficulties, she altered course and turned her attention toward rescuing these sailors. Concerned primarily for their safety, she immediately advised the sailors to abandon their boats. She rescued four of the sailors into her RIB and observed that the remaining three sailors were rescued onto the pier wall by persons on the shore, who were not directly associated with the event. The action of the Assistant Coach in assuming charge and rescuing four of the sailors is to be commended.

Having returned the rescued sailors to the shore and satisfied herself that all of the Squad's sailors were now safely ashore, she returned to assist the Lead Coach, who, by this time, managed to re-start his boat, but was still experiencing propulsion power difficulties, due to previously sustained propeller damage. Initially, they considered what actions they could take to recover the seven unmanned dinghies, but decided that it was both difficult and dangerous.

A number of concerned persons ashore realised that some of the squad members had arrived back to the National Yacht Club unaccompanied. Having observed the difficulties of the remaining sailors and their coaches, decided to raise the alarm. By the time RNLI Inshore Lifeboat was launched, all of the Squad's sailors were safely ashore

The Lifeboat made contact with the two coach boats, which by that time, were both suffering from propulsion difficulties. The coaches confirmed, to the RNLI crew, that all of the sailors were safely ashore. Both of the coaches' RIBs were taken in tow (one by the Lifeboat and one by an assisting RIB from the Royal St George Yacht Club) and both coaches were landed at the National Yacht Club pontoon to take charge of the Squad Members ashore.

2. Summary Analysis from the Report

By definition, competitive sport seeks to push boundaries. Our top tier of athletes and their coaches, must, understandably, strive toward constant achievement and improvement to drive their success in top international competition. Unlike many other competitive international activities, sailing does not take place in a well-controlled environment, but is very subject to the vagaries of the weather. Competitive sailors' success must therefore depend on their ability to maximise performance in any prevailing conditions. Pushing personal boundaries and honing their skills and experiences in progressively more challenging circumstances is a natural and necessary part of the athlete's development.

At the core of this discussion is the effective assessment, mitigation and control of risk. Most people are familiar with workplace practices, where repetitive daily processes are carried out in purpose-built environments. In such cases, once-off static risk assessment exercises and fixed safe work processes generally suffice. In contrast, watersport activities take place within the uncontrollable maritime environment, where the risks associated with otherwise identical activities can vary significantly with even small changes in the prevailing conditions, thus requiring vastly different levels of preparatory safety control arrangements.

Dinghy racing is a competitive activity, involving varying sized fleets of boats. These fleets rely on common support and safety boat resources for their collective safety. In normal circumstances,

individual dinghy sailors are self-reliant and can depart, race and return to shore, without any assistance whatever. When some minor difficulties are experienced by the sailors, safety boats generally maintain a comforting presence nearby, while the sailors resolve their problems without direct assistance. In more demanding conditions the safety boats may need to physically intervene and assist the sailors to resume sailing. In worsening conditions many sailors can simultaneously require safety boat support. In extreme cases, the entire sailing complement may need to be assisted back to the safety of land, or have their boats taken in tow. Small dis-improvements in prevailing conditions can drastically change the level of safety response required.

It is therefore vital that risk assessment processes properly anticipate the true level of risk that might occur and that the appropriate risk reduction and risk control measures are provided in advance. Where situations arise such that the demand overwhelms the level of resource available and it then becomes necessary to request emergency assistance.

Where large scale events are being planned, or in cases where there are other particular risks, it is essential to consider the capability and capacity of the local emergency service, always bearing in mind the possibility of these resources being committed elsewhere, when required. In cases where the response requirement for an emergency incident exceeds the available local emergency capacity and capability, then a major emergency situation must automatically be declared. Unfortunately, a number of dinghy sailing events have had to be elevated to major incident in recent years.

In summary, this incident clearly demonstrated how a dinghy fleet activity can easily escalate beyond the capabilities of the resources which were planned for it.

This incident, and the arrival of storm Brian, occurred just five days after Hurricane Ophelia had caused a one-day national shutdown in Ireland and very tragically resulted in the deaths of three people. Quite naturally, media and public opinion in Ireland became temporarily focused on the safety of all outdoor activities in such extreme weather conditions. In the immediate aftermath of the Optimist Squad coaching session of 21st October, the incident was reported at national news level. Many opinions were expressed in direct correspondence to Irish Sailing, and more widely within social and public media about what had gone wrong and opinions were offered as to why. Much of the discussion involved the decision to launch and the awareness of the relevant risks.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is obvious that the impact of this incident could clearly have been averted if the decision to launch had not been taken. The original terms of reference for this inquiry requested that the team should examine the incident from the point of this decision, up until all personnel were safely ashore. Having now had the opportunity to examine the case, in reasonable detail, the team conclude that it would have been grossly unfair to focus on the consequences of this one decision alone, without considering the other intricate circumstances and influences, which also prevailed.

3. Recommendations from the Report

The following are the recommendations detailed in the Report:

1. A top-down internal review of all existing policies, processes, procedures, practices, controls and oversight mechanisms related specifically to the management of performance coaching programmes

Review considerations should include, but not necessarily be limited to:

- Development of more formally defined processes to implement performance coaching programmes.
 - Development of clearer definitions of levels of authority, responsibility and accountability for the overall management and support of the various performance coaching programme, projects and campaigns
 - Development of arrangements for the management and measurement of the quality of outcome for these programmes.
 - Development of practical tools and aids such as easy to use process/ procedural guidance, structured reports and practical checklist mechanisms to assist coaches and their coaching programme-delivery managers in providing safe and effective coaching services, as well as providing a basis for improved oversight.
 - Provision of the essential logistical arrangements and infrastructure to support these coaching programmes.
 - Introduction of more formal management processes to ensure readiness, reliability, maintenance and condition assurance of all key physical assets (boats, trailers, vehicles), equipment, supplies and consumables required to support coaching activities.
 - Development of mechanisms to ensure proper management oversight of outsourced coaching programmes.
 - Development of the proper induction, validation and training of those involve in these programmes.
 - Establishment of effective arrangements to ensure continued compliance, improvement and adequate oversight of whatever processes are put in place.
2. Revision of Irish Sailing's Health, Safety and Welfare statement.
 3. Review specific chains of responsibility for the practical implementation of safety arrangements.
 4. Inspire the development of a more active and vibrant Health Safety and Welfare culture within the organisation, making it clear that improvements are to everyone's benefit and are everyone's responsibility.
 5. Development of practical measures and appropriate monitoring to ensure awareness and implementation of Irish Sailing's policy and recommended practices document "Code of Ethics and Good Practices (for activities involving Children and Vulnerable Adults)" in all activities where Irish Sailing staff and contractors are directly involving children and vulnerable adults.
 6. Recognise that there is a common need among Irish Sailing's member organisations for improved policies and practical guidance for the safety of dinghy fleet sailing in general. Accordingly, consider establishing a broader project, with national scope, among member organisations with the aims similar to:
 - Reviewing the adequacy of contemporary risk assessment methodologies typically used in for the management of dinghy fleet safety.
 - Providing easy-to-use and practical guidance to assess event specific risks and to indicate appropriately scaled control measures.
 - Testing and validating the measures developed on a variety of types and scales of activities.
 - Proposing appropriate training for all personnel involved in the use of the mechanisms put in place by the project.

Irish Sailing Actions since establishing the Investigation

Immediately following the incident, Irish Sailing updated specific protocols for the Performance Squads, including:

- VHF Radios to be used by all coaches afloat
- Beachmaster ashore for the duration events
- Safety plan for the event drafted to include provision for child protection protocols and plan for safety provision
- Irish Sailing performance team contactable in the event of an emergency
- Equivalent of the RYA Risk Assessment Plan to be implemented before going afloat
- Documented Briefing of Coaches by Irish Sailing Performance team in advance
- Meeting of Coaching team in advance of programme start to agree programme, check equipment and establish event protocols.

Irish Sailing Board Response to the Report

The Board of Irish Sailing have considered the report and decided that it is in the best interests of our sport and the organisation to publish the report in full.

Irish Sailing fully supports the outcomes of the report and have appointed a working group to consider the recommendations, assess how best Irish Sailing can address them, and help with the implementation. The group appointed are: Brian Craig (Board), Harry Hermon (CEO), James O'Callaghan (Performance Director), Ciaran McSweeney (RCYC, MBSC) & David Turner (NYC).

This group has already begun work on the recommendations and are aiming for initial outcomes to be completed by 31st March 2018.

Irish Sailing would like to formally express our gratitude to Philip Scallan and his team for the work and diligence they put in to the investigation and drafting of the report, on a voluntary basis.

For any queries please contact Harry Hermon CEO (harry@sailing.ie)